Dear brothers and sisters!

“You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34).

Throughout the first years of my pontificate, I have repeatedly expressed my particular concern for the lamentable situation of many migrants and refugees fleeing from war, persecution, natural disasters and poverty. This situation is undoubtedly a “sign of the times” which I have tried to interpret, with the help of the Holy Spirit, ever since my visit to Lampedusa on 8 July 2013. When I instituted the new Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, I wanted a particular section – under my personal direction for the time being – to express the Church’s concern for migrants, displaced people, refugees and victims of human trafficking.

Considering the current situation, welcoming means, above all, offering broader options for migrants and refugees to enter destination countries safely and legally. This calls for a concrete commitment to increase and simplify the process for granting humanitarian visas and for reunifying families. At the same time, I hope that a greater number of countries will adopt private and community sponsorship programmes, and open humanitarian corridors for particularly vulnerable refugees. Furthermore, special temporary visas should be granted to people fleeing conflicts in neighbouring countries. Collective and arbitrary expulsions of migrants and refugees are not suitable solutions, particularly where people are returned to countries which cannot guarantee respect for human dignity and fundamental rights. Once again, I want to emphasise the importance of offering migrants and refugees adequate and dignified initial accommodation. “More widespread programmes of welcome, already initiated in different places, seem to favour a personal encounter and allow for greater quality of service and increased guarantees of success”.

The principle of the centrality of the human person, firmly stated by my beloved Predecessor, Benedict XVI, obliges us to always prioritise personal safety over national security. Promoting essentially means a determined effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees – as well as the communities which welcome them – are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity intended by the Creator. Among these, we must recognize the true value of the religious dimension, ensuring to all foreigners in any country the freedom of religious belief and practice. Many migrants and refugees have abilities which must be appropriately recognised and valued. Since “work, by its nature, is meant to unite peoples”, I encourage a determined effort to promote the social and professional inclusion of migrants and refugees, guaranteeing for all – including those seeking asylum – the possibility of employment, language instruction and active citizenship, together with sufficient information provided in their mother tongue.

The final verb – integrating – concerns the opportunities for intercultural enrichment brought about by the presence of migrants and refugees. Integration is not “an assimilation that leads migrants to suppress or to forget their own cultural identity. Rather, contact with others leads to discovering their ‘secret’, to being open to them in order to welcome their valid aspects and thus contribute to knowing each one better. This is a lengthy process that aims to shape societies and cultures, making them more and more a reflection of the multi-faceted gifts of God to human beings”.

Today, 15 August, we celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. The Holy Mother of God herself experienced the hardship of exile (Matthew 2:13-15), lovingly accompanied her Son’s journey to Calvary, and now shares eternally his glory. To her maternal intercession we entrust the hopes of all the world’s migrants and refugees and the aspirations of the communities which welcome them, so that, responding to the Lord’s supreme commandment, we may all learn to love the other, the stranger, as ourselves.

Vatican City, 15 August 2017

Solemnity of the Assumption of the B.V. Mary

FRANCIS